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Testimony in Support of Increased Funding for Higher Education

Hello Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Committee,

Our names are Callie Gale Heilmann and Gemeem Davis, and we are the Co-Directors of Bridgeport Generation Now, a grassroots civic engagement organization with over 300 members in Bridgeport, CT, fighting for a more just, equitable, democratic, and livable city. Bridgeport Generation Now is a member of Recovery For All—a statewide coalition bringing together more than 60 community, faith, and labor organizations across Connecticut. We are asking you to fund higher education. Governor Lamont's budget makes massive cuts to higher education and we are asking you to restore the funding and expand it.

The student debt crisis in the United States is real and no student should have to choose between their education and financial stability. And Connecticut must do its part to not add to the crisis but instead to relieve and protect students.

Black students hold almost twice as much student debt as their white peers, largely due to differences in interest accrual and graduate school borrowing. And four years after graduation, 48% of Black students owe an average of 6% more than they borrowed and are the most likely to struggle financially due to student loan debt.

We know first hand the struggle of having to defer because of not earning enough money to pay the loans back, accumulating interest on top of interest, resulting in "income driven" student loan payments of over \$700 a month! At Bridgeport Generation Now we don't want today's students, particularly young Black people in our state to have to deal with these student loan debt problems. It's not right. It's not fair.

We are asking for a new vision and a new approach to the way we fund public higher education. Let's think about what we want for the future of our state and for our children and then do what it takes to get us there. We want to use that vision as the baseline, not the dismal status quo. We should aim to provide no less than we would hope for for our own family for each of these students. We have the luxury to dream in this way because the state has the wealth to make the choice to invest in our future.

The share of the cost of public higher ed borne by the state has reduced steadily over the decades, taking a particularly steep decline in 2007 and has not recovered since. The share of the cost borne by students has increased as a result. Sadly, the steep decline of the state funding and the shift of the responsibility for keeping public higher ed afloat onto students **coincides with a historic increase of black and brown students in the system**. Today, more than 50% of CT's community college students identify as non-white.

As the wealthiest state in the country, Connecticut should be a shining example for the nation—a place where every family has what we need to live a good life. In order to end this ever-evolving racist system that guarantees the outcome of deep racial disparities in our state, we must enact **anti-racist laws** and policies in Connecticut. And anti-racist laws and policies and budgets are ones that put our public resources in place to end racial and economic disparities and inequities.

It's time for CT to think and act critically to make sure that we are not burdening young people - in particular - young Black people - with unnecessary debt. We have the resources and the power to do that. We must say NO to tuition hikes. It's time to fund our future.

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